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ABSTRACT

Evaluations of basic speech courses should be undertaken to benefit the students. Traditional evaluations in education typically do not assess the education of students, and departmental reviews seldom focus on how well students' needs are being met by specific courses. Evaluations should identify the skills and knowledge students need, and produce verifiable research data which examines how well the basic course meets those needs. Needs can be determined in part by reviewing the available surveys from a variety of academic disciplines and professions. There are also several methods for gathering information about the effectiveness of the basic course, such as student evaluations of instructors and the course, or locally developed or nationally standardized examinations to determine what students in the basic course are learning. Whatever the method employed, the goal should be a demonstration of student needs and student development as a means to define and evaluate a basic course curriculum. Approaching an evaluation in this manner focuses the attention on educational effectiveness, rather than the mere acquisition of assets. Also, the department which exhibits effectiveness establishes accountability. The final result of an evaluation which benefits the students is also a product which can benefit the department and the director. (MM)

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Evaluating the Basic Course: Benefits to the Students

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Most of us can probably remember learning the journalistic rule which states you should ask, "Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How?" to describe any situation. Presumably, by following the rule you would be certain you had not forgotten to ask any important questions in your pursuit of information. These same questions lend themselves to establishing criteria for a course evaluation also. However, higher education frequently forgets or ignores this rule when asking questions that pertain to evaluation. Evaluation in higher education seems to follow a much different rule of thumb, specifically one which questions "How much or how many?" Subsequently, issues which should play an important role in evaluation have no part at all. In the case of evaluating the basic course, the focus should be on "Who," meaning the students, "What," meaning the students' communication needs, "How," as in "How are those needs being met?" and "Why," as in "Why are we evaluating?" The "Where" and "When" of evaluation, are more appropriately answered in the other papers on this panel.

The first question to be answered before the evaluation process begins ought to be, "Why are we evaluating?" Specifically, the questions to be addressed include: "What is the ultimate goal or purpose of evaluating the basic course?" Will it be undertaken to benefit the students which it serves? Will the evaluation be made to serve the department which controls it? Will the evaluation be used to reward or benefit the basic course director? Is the evaluation to be used as a political tool with the goal of justifying the allocation of resources? Will the department alone profit from it or is it being instituted to guarantee that the basic communication competency needs of the students are being met? All those involved need to have a clear understanding of the use intended for the results of that evaluation. The answers to the questions will determine the approach to the evaluation, because the planned use for the results will affect what is chosen to indicate quality. The evaluation of the basic course need not create an either/or situation because both of the "benefit the department" and "benefit the student" goals can be met. It is true that if a director is concerned with the legitimate academic needs of the students, an evaluation used as a political tool could aid that person in achieving both goals. However, directly benefitting students has not always been a primary goal of traditional methods of evaluation in higher education. Which is precisely the reason why it is the primary focus of this paper.

There are essentially two approaches to the typical traditional evaluation of programs and departments in higher education. The first can be termed a reputational approach and the second a resources approach (Astin, 1987). Under the reputational approach, peer groups rank universities, colleges, and departments by their historical prestige which results in a type of popularity contest. The resources approach allows for objective measures to be applied in considering quality and enumerates such tangibles as faculty degrees, number of faculty publications, faculty salaries, the institution's facilities, financial resources, and other non-student, non-curriculum related variables. A major problem with these approaches is that reputation and resources assessment does not enlighten students as to how well their talents will be developed at a particular institution or even in a particular course; it only informs them of a program's relative position in the pecking order. A second objection is that peer evaluations "protect the group, rather than its clients" (Douglas, 1987); a sort of insurance policy. Third, according to a report by the American Council on Education (ACA Bulletin, 1988), subjective peer ratings generated by a reputational approach correlate positively with objective measures of departmental quality found in a resources approach. In other words, peers rate an institution or department higher on the scale simply because it has more of the countable assets. The two methods of assessment are very likely to consistently reach the same conclusion. However, Bowen (1981) observed . . .

> the research on student development indicates that having a great reputation and abundant resources does not necessarily guarantee excellence in the educational program; indeed, some of the most effective undergraduate education occurs at institutions with very modest reputations and resources (cited in Astin, 1987, p.90)

Finally, these traditional assessments of quality and excellence in higher education serve to create a competitive environment in which those on top of the heap strive to retain their position from year to year and those below compete for the scarce and finite resources needed to be on top. This fosters a "win-lose" attitude, rather than a cooperative position which focuses on improving educational programs to develop the talents of the

students. The ultimate problem with the two traditional approaches is that neither assesses the education of students. Traditional evaluations appear to be undertaken only to determine which institution or department has more assets than another, to protect their own interests, or to document and argue for additional assets. They typically do not address the fundamental purpose of higher education: educating students and developing their talents to the fullest potential (Astin, 1987).

The faculty and the director of the basic course ought to be primarily concerned with the extent to which the basic course is fulfilling the communication needs of their students. This concern establishes some criteria upon which an evaluation can be made. It comprises the basis of the question, "What are we evaluating?" As Pearson and Sorenson (1980) note, past research regarding the basic course demonstrates institutions have two goals for the basic course: to introduce fundamental speech communication theories and principles and to satisfy the students' communication needs. While we generally assume those needs are being met by the basic course, we have little evidence to document our claims. Departmental and program reviews seldom, if ever, look specifically at how well student needs are being met by particular courses. Upon review of basic course surveys it was noted that instructional approaches to the basic course have not undergone dramatic change in the past twenty years (Trank, 1985). Understandably, the need to be near the academic mainstream is a very real pressure on basic course directors. Demonstrating that one is following the norm enables directors to counter potential arguments for adaptions in the course. We are not advocating change simply for the sake of change. We are not even arguing that the basic course should undergo significant change. Our position, simply stated, is that any evaluation of the basic course ought to focus on the outcomes of instruction in that course. In order to do that, we must assess the communication needs and competence of the students in the course and make legitimate efforts to determine the extent to which the basic course fulfills those needs. Any conclusions resulting from an evaluation of the basic course need to be based on identifiable student needs and verifiable research data which examines how well that course meets those needs.

An overview of surveys identifying the basic course content demonstrate that except for some increased attention to communication-

oriented and multiple or combination approaches, the basic course has retained its public speaking emphasis since the 1974 national Speech Communication Association survey (Trank, 1985). The 1985 SCA survey indicated the basic course has strengthened its public speaking approach with a performance orientation at the expense of a slight drop in combination or hybrid approaches (Gibson, Hanna, Huddleston, 1985). Frequent surveys, panels, and basic course conferences give us a fairly good picture of the instructional approaches and content of the basic courses around the country. We do not have as clear a picture of the communication needs of students in those courses.

In one of the first reports surveying the opinions of alumni of the basic course, Lohr (1974) reported rankings for frequency, importance, and difficulty of fourteen communication activities typically used in the alumni's professions and asked for the their suggestions on types of skills which should be taught in class. The most frequently used activities were social conversation, making decisions, and giving information to one person. The most important activities were giving information and making decisions with one person, as well as giving information to a group. The most difficult activites were identified as persuading and making decisions with a group, in addition to persuading one person. The alumni surveyed recommended that giving impromptu "off the cuff" speeches, giving persuasive speeches, and activities to reduce speaking anxieties be given the most importance in classroom activities.

Research which asks professionals outside of the academic institution to identify communication activities that will provide relevant and useful course content has since been simulated by other surveys. The Pearson and Sorenson (1980) survey asked for student and alumni perceptions and preferences on several aspects of the basic course. The results show that students and alumni strongly recommended that the basic course be required. They also preferred that it be a combination of both interpersonal communication and public speaking with more practice than theory. The students thought the presentational speech was the most important speech activity, but the alumni thought the presentational speech, the informative speech, and the persuasive speech were all equally important. The students noted they found the interview to be the most important interpersonal communication activity taught in class and the alumni recommended the

small group discussion be ranked as most important. This study discusses how some of these differences in preference can be accounted for and also identifies student and alumni suggestions for course format and number of students per section.

Becker and Ekdom (1980) contend that either faculty don't listen to students, so they are unaware that students lack oral communication competency and therefore don't require coursework which would help resolve the problem, or that faculty do recognize that a problem exists, yet fail to require prescriptive coursework. They reviewed a number of studies which surveyed not only students and alumni, but also employers on aspects related to communication skills. They use these studies to demonstrate that students, alumni, and employers recognize that there is a problem, feel disatisfied with the level of communication competence which is reached in college, and want institutions to do something about it. The results from each study reviewed generally show that graduates have trouble with public speaking anxiety and interpersonal oral communication competencies, and that employers rate oral and written communication skills as the most important skills for professional careers. The authors do warn that an emphasis on skills courses need to be balanced with non-skills courses to keep the scholarly enterprise of the department intact.

Johnson and Johnson (1982) assessed the human communication needs of currently practicing engineers, reasoning that the opinions of those who are in the profession would help them identify communication skills needed by students planning for similar careers. They also argued that instructors should be accountable for what they teach and can accomplish this by determing from "experts" precisely what students need. The most important communication skills for practicing engineers identified in this study were interpersonal, public speaking, group problem solving, persuasion, and listening behavior.

The most recent major literature review on communication skills needed by students was written by Weitzel and Gaske (1984). Although the skills identified are less specific to the basic course and oriented more toward an overall career development curriculum for communication majors, the findings are useful for a basic course evaluation. The article reviewed numerous surveys which identified the communication skills necessary for students' future career success according to employers,

employees, and alumni. Especially helpful are the reviews of alternative sources of research which identify specific communication skills needed in business and industry.

In another field-specific study conducted with entry level employees who had recently received a business degree, Bednar and Oleny (1987) found that the most frequently used communication forms were memorandum, computer network, informational report, and letter. The three most serious communication problems were poor listening, lack of conciseness, and poor feedback. They ranked the following communication skills in order of importance: interpersonal, oral, and written skills.

More recently, Johnson and Szczupakiewicz (1987) asked a nationally representative sample of public speaking instructors and alumni questions about the basic college public speaking course. The authors argued that although we have numerous suggestions for course content, we don't know to what extent these skills are used in work related activities, nor do we know the amount of similarity that exists between which skills and styles faculty teach and which skills and styles alumni use on the job. They found that faculty and alumni have significant differences in their attitudes toward the importance of specific public speaking skills. Although the authors recognized that all public speaking skills which alumni consider to be important could not conceivably be covered in one semester, they did recommend that faculty consider increasing the coursework focus on presentational speaking, entertaining speaking, handling questions and answers, and small group discussion. The also noted that in addition to the extemporaneous delivery style taught by faculty, the impromptu, memorized, and manuscript delivery styles are used by alumni on the job and should be included in delivery style instruction in the classroom.

From the results of these and other surveys we can determine which general communication skills students need for success after graduation. As the Johnson and Johnson study noted, some instructors are interested in being accountable for what they teach in the classroom and have devised methods for obtaining solid research data which identifies legitimate student needs. The assumption underlying this approach to curriculum content is that although communication faculty are academically and professionally qualified to better specify the principles and theories of communication to be included in the basic course, the students and alumni

are in the best position to decide if the course meets their communication needs (Pearson and Sorenson, 1980). This premise is related to assessing excellence in education. Educators realize they need to document what students need in order to build a curriculum which accomplishes the original goal of the basic course: to meet the students' basic communication needs.

Those needs can be determined in part by reviewing the available surveys from a variety of academic disciplines and professions. Every department and program which is planning a review of the basic course ought to also survey students in the course, and graduates in a wide range of professions. While there are obviously communication skills which are necessary across a wide spectrum of professions and situtations, there may be skills and needs specific to the typical students at particular institutions. Unless the faculty of the basic course makes the effort to discover those needs, it is unlikely that any meaningful assessment of the effectiveness of the basic course can be offered by a review process.

The final question to address is, "How are the students' needs being met?" We can determine this by assessing whether students' skills in areas of need were actually developed by enrollment in the basic course. We need to determine that a level of competency has been achieved. Again, this is a major problem with most reviews in higher education. Few ever look at students or at their level of communication competence. A high quality program must have feedback on student performance and must allow the instructors to develop their teaching skills in the least threatening atmosphere possible. This is one of the primary reasons why students cannot be ignored in any program review or evaluation. Feedback from students is the only evidence educators have to assess the contribution of a course to students' intellectual and personal development (Carpenter, 1987). Put another way, students always have and always will evaluate our courses and our teaching. Our only choice in this area is whether we want to use those evaluations to make our courses the best educational experience it can possibly be for future students.

There are several methods for gathering information about the effectiveness of the basic course. We can use student evaluations of instructors and the course. We can take advantage of surveys which have already been done and conduct additional surveys of former students from our institutions. We can use locally developed or nationally standardized

examinations to determine what students in the basic course are learning. We can identify their levels of proficiency in relation to other students in the course or to relevant peer groups at other institutions or particular regions of the country. One method of identifying whether the basic course is improving the students' skills is to develop a value-added or similar model of assessment, wherein students' skills and knowledge are measured prior to beginning the coursework and are later compared to a measured level of achievement at the end of the course. This makes sense particularly in situations where students might enter the basic course with a variety of levels of proficiency in basic communication. The results of one study indicated that although the majority of the students did reach college level proficiency standards in writing and speaking, by the end of the semester, only the lowest entry level group demonstrated major gains between their pre-instruction and post-instruction test scores (Trank and Steele, 1983). To better understand such outcomes, the authors recommended further testing of communication skills over the long term to determine the amount of growth, retention, or loss of communication competence due to the effect of instructor, course, and classroom interaction. Carpenter (1987) recommended that educators test for growth and focus on student achievement as a means of defining and developing the curriculum. He stated this is also one method educators can use to meet the public demand for accountability. The need to be accountable is becoming more important to educators, particularly since financing for some courses, programs, and even institutions will be based on their ability to demonstrate educational effectiveness. Any of these approaches satisfy the need for demonstrating effectiveness as they base quality on measures beyond historical prestige and quantity of resources.

In summary, what we propose is that the evaluation of the basic course be undertaken to benefit the students. Traditional evaluations in education typically do not assess the education of students and departmental reviews seldom, if ever, focus on how well students' needs are being met by specific courses. Yet, the goal of higher education is to educate students and the goals of the basic course are to teach principles of communication and develop the students' skills. Therefore, the evaluation ought to be a legitimate effort to identify the skills and knowledge students need, and to produce verifiable research data which examines how well the basic course

meets those needs. We have identified several surveys which can be used to partially determine the students' needs. However, students of the basic course and graduates in a range of professions must be surveyed also, as they are in the best position to know if the course meets their needs. We also noted a number of methods which could be used to assess the students' level of competence after completing the basic course. Whichever method you choose to employ, the goal ought to be a demonstration of student needs and student development as a means to define and evaluate a basic course curriculum. Approaching an evaluation in this manner focuses the attention on educational effectiveness, rather than the mere acquisition of assets. Also, the department which exhibits effectiveness also establishes accountability. The final result of an evaluation which benefits the students, is also a product which can benefit the department and the director.

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